

A STATE BETWEEN

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the 'state between' occupied by the performer in a live media performance. Working from Matthew Causey's contention that 'the performer becomes the medium through which the technology reaches the audience' [2, p.45], the argument presented is that within live media performance modes, the performer actually occupies a dual state whereby she is both active within and acted upon by the developing experience which is generated.

Through an examination of the onstage technology employed within a live intermedial performance, the forms of live interaction resultant from its use by the improvising performer are analysed. This direct interaction with onstage technology, which constitutes much of the performance, is seen to generate further strands of exchange and feedback between performer, experiencer and the experience itself, resulting in a live and ever-shifting 'state between' being occupied by the performer.

1. INTRODUCTION

As a solo intermedial research practitioner, an examination of my positioning and role within the work I create is a vital part of analysing and defining it as a performance practice. In an effort to address and further such an examination, this paper works from Matthew Causey's contention that in multi-media performance, 'the performer becomes the medium through which technology reaches the audience' [2, p.45].

In response to this statement, I propose rather than a medium, that the performer within *live* intermedial forms of performance can be more helpfully conceptualised as an intermediary agency or hub, both active within and acted upon by the event. Within live media performance forms, which are constructed in real time and in the presence of the 'experiencers'¹ [1, p.45], the performer occupies a state between the onstage technology, the experiencers and the developing experience, as well as between the role of creative technician and performer and finally between the pre-existing conditions of the performance and its emergent properties, revealed in successive moments of live interaction.

¹ Robin Nelson's coining of the term 'experiencer' is a recognition that much intermedial work represents a 'broadly visceral, sensual encounter' [1, p.45], which is designed not to be spectated, but experienced.

2. LIVE INTERMEDIAL PERFORMANCE

The mode of performance I create, live intermedial performance, was developed through practice as research and involves me, as solo performer, interacting with an onstage technological kit to generate combinations of sound and image. The technology includes a bookreader, with live feed camera attached and a laptop which is used to generate pre-recorded images and video (see Figure 1).

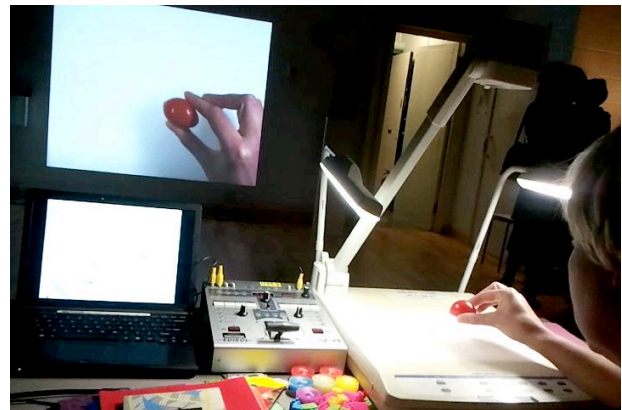


Figure 1: The bookreader and laptop in action in live intermedial performance (photo taken from *Cover, Space for Change Project*, London, 03/12/12)

A vision mixer offers the capacity to mix and merge the live feed images and those from the laptop in real time, with the results projected onto a screen opposite me (see Figure 2).



Figure 2: Merged live feed and pre-recorded images projected on screen (photo taken from *Cover*, Space for Change Project, London, 03/12/12)

In addition, a microphone and loop pedal are also present on stage, through which I sing and loop my own voice. The construction of the vocal soundscape again takes place live and in the presence of the experiencers.

As well as interacting with the onstage technology to generate combinations of sound and image, another aspect of this mode of performance involves me performing in relation and response to the combinations of sound and image created, as opposed to activating such combinations (see Figure 3). In an effort to address the variety of activities which constitute live intermedial performance and the states I occupy within it, I refer to myself as a performer/activator, a term which holds the roles of creative technician and solo performer involved in a deliberately questioning relationship. Both roles are located and held in me onstage, but the point of intersection, if indeed it exists, is a shifting and elusive one, generating a fluidity, uncertainty and productive instability at the heart of the performing experience.

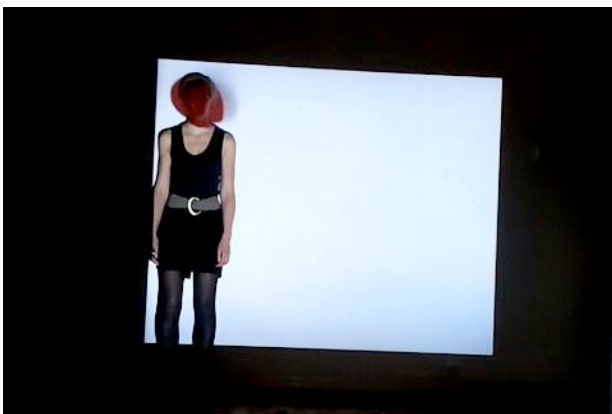


Figure 3: The performer/activator interacting with projected images (photo taken from *Cover*, Space for Change Project, London, 03/12/12)

Live intermedial performance exists on the boundaries of a number of modes of performance; sitting somewhere between VJ-ing, multi-media installation and

live art, it draws upon and employs elements of all three. The defining factor of operating within this mode is the real time interaction between me as solo performer and the various interfaces or 'shared space[s]' [3, p.1] onstage which are offered by the presence of the book reader, vision mixer, laptop and loop pedal.

Such interfaces allow me to be 'processual in the moment' [1, p.16] and are the tools through which the performance can be constructed in real time. Working with pre-existing material of images, texts, objects and songs which I bring to the event, I use the onstage technology to combine this material live and crucially, to decide in the moment when, where and how it will sit within the developing and ever-shifting intermedial combinations I generate.

3. THE ROLE OF THE PERFORMER IN LIVE MEDIA FORMS

This capacity to construct and mix live is of course a key aspect of many live media performance forms, including VJ-ing, live animation and other modes which involve 'the live and improvised performance of audio-visual media' [5, p.194]. As recognised by a number of practitioners and theorists, the act of live mixing and improvising impacts upon the positioning and role of the performer significantly, in that their construction of the experience always involves a response to the conditions and moment of performance. For Mark Amerika, this renders the VJ a 'digital shaman, subject to the event rather than the centre of it'. He argues that she becomes 'lost' in the experience of 'hyperimprovising', thus becoming a 'proprioceptive instrument' [6, p.233] of the performance event she is part of constructing.

On the other hand, Grayson Cooke, a live audio-visual media performance practitioner and researcher, uses the term 'comprovisation' within his work as 'a way of recognising the intricate interweaving of the com-posed with the improvised' [4, p.11]. Similarly to a VJ, Cooke is a 'visualist' who collaborates with musicians to create work 'in 'real time', on the fly, in the moment' [4, p.10]. However, rather than conceptualising this experience as loss of agency where the performer is an instrument of the experience, Cooke rather attempts to address and acknowledge what he conceives of as the 'higher degree of aesthetic decision making' involved in improvising in this way, as well as assessing the effect of the 'pre-existence of structural arrangements or media samples' [4, p.11] which are brought to the event.

While Amerika's live media performer surrenders herself entirely to the experience of 'hyperimprovising', becoming an 'instrument' of the images generated which flow through her, Cooke's comproviser walks a line between that which is already in place and that which emerges from and is generated in the moment. According to Cooke, this is not a case of surrender on the part of the performer, but rather that they are

‘structuring a performance around decisions made in the moment’ [4, p.10-11].

Such theories can in turn be compared with Causey’s claim that ‘the performer becomes a medium through which technology reaches the audience...the performers becoming like Shamans or translators, who speak the hidden knowledge to the spectators’. Though Causey proposes that ‘agency and metaphysical presence reside in this formulation’ [2, p.45], he, like Amerika, uses the metaphor of a shaman to describe the performer, who in both formulations, is rendered a medium through which the technology passes.

I acknowledge that within a live intermedial performance, part of my role is indeed as a medium, or as I prefer to term it, a conduit. As a solo performer/activator, this aspect is arguably amplified, in that *all* aspects of the intermedial combinations created on stage pass through me in one way or another. This is distinct from a VJ or Cooke’s ‘visualist’, both of whom respond to prompts offered by a fellow improvising performer; the DJ and musician respectively. The interplay which occurs between them is, in live intermedial performance, centred in me as the individual performer and activator. I compile and construct configurations, which are ultimately *self-generating* in nature, with the performance becoming a looping response to itself and each action feeding back into and responding to what has gone before, while also building the conditions for the experience to develop. All of these aspects of the performance and its development pass through me, and as such, I act as a conduit for its construction.

However, to conceptualise this aspect of the role I play as rendering me purely an ‘instrument’ of the experience, existing in a shamanic, trance-like state, fails to fully encompass my experience of performing under these circumstances. Like Cooke, I recognise that, in the moment, there is not a complete abandonment to the experience and that, on the contrary, I feel a heightened sense of focus on that moment, related to the primary importance of the decisions I make in the activation of the elements in play and the building of the experience.

In this sense, the elements of performance do not simply pass through me; I act upon them, deciding how to manipulate and mix, to build and develop the event for the experiencers. In doing this, this I am engaged in a Deleuzian form of decision making in that my decision in the moment is ‘not a judgement, nor is it the organic consequence of a judgement: it springs vitally from a whirlwind of forces’ [6, p.233]. These forces – the material I bring to the event, the onstage kit and its capacity, the presence and response of the experiencers and the experience itself - all influence my positioning within the performance practice.

This positioning is conceptually at the centre of the experience, as a hub through which all the spokes of the experience pass and from which all emerge. However, I am also and equally subject to the developing performance, in that I respond both to its pre-existing conditions, but also to its emergent properties, which are only revealed in the moments of interaction which constitute that development. In addition, the ways in which I can and do respond to the intermedial combinations I construct varies greatly throughout a performance, constantly shifting my positioning or ‘state’ within the web of elements in play.

In order to examine this shifting positioning, I will now go on to analyse two examples of the ‘state between’ I occupy in live intermedial performance, focusing in particular on the different pieces of onstage technology I employ and the particular forms of interaction which are resultant from their presence onstage.

4. COVER: A LIVE INTERMEDIAL INSTALLATION

The examples are taken from a piece of work I created in December last year, titled *Cover*. I described *Cover* as a ‘live intermedial installation’ and it represented a significant development in the performance practice I had created thus far. Rather than presenting a performance with a set score and limited capacity for variation within that structure, I now chose to generate a 90 minute piece, with no pre-existing configuration in place. Instead, I conceived a number of ‘movements’ involving possible combinations of sound, image, object and text. These movements could be enacted in any order or not at all, depending on my response to the conditions of the performance, and could also be varied, truncated or extended at will.

Finally, I presented the piece as an interactive installation. Those who attended could come and go as they pleased from the space I was working in and I offered the opportunity to interact with the installation I was creating, through writing down song titles and placing them in a box. These titles were then picked up by me and woven as best I could into the fabric of the installation; sometimes lyrics were sung, occasionally I would respond to a song with an improvised monologue or alternatively, generate image combinations in response to the song title or its content. *Cover* was a way of me interrogating the capacity of the technological kit I had assembled to mix elements of text, object, image and sound live. It was also a test of the ‘comprovising’ performer/activator role I had already established and my ability to respond both to the pre-existing material and the emergent properties of the installation.

4.1. Real time merging of images

The first example from *Cover* involves a moment in the installation where I merge live and pre-recorded images, in this case video footage of cars driving through the

night and a live feed of my real time manipulation of blue gels on the illuminated base of the bookreader (see Figure 4).

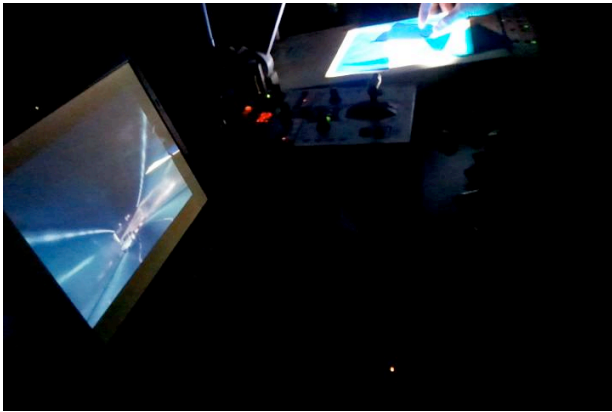


Figure 4: Pre-recorded footage on the laptop and live manipulation of blue gels on the base of the bookreader (photo taken from *Cover*, Space for Change Project, London, 03/12/12)

The result of this merging, enacted using the vision mixer, is then projected onto a screen opposite me (see Figure 2). The action is accompanied by a layered and looped vocal score, which was also constructed live prior to the image manipulation, generating a mesmeric and insistent soundscape in the space.

This movement of the piece develops when I use the live feed camera on the bookreader as a way of combining a close up of my face with the images of driving cars, while speaking an improvised monologue, in response to one of the songs offered as part of the installation (see Figure 5).



Figure 5: A live feed close up of the performer/activator is combined with pre-recorded images (photo taken from *Cover*, Space for Change Project, London, 03/12/12)

The vision mixer is the crucial part of the kit in this moment, in that it offers live mixing and merging of the two images, allowing me to choose which one to reveal and in this case, to work with both simultaneously. The contemplative and mesmeric combination of moving

images I create is entirely influenced by the floating layered and looped sound which is present in the space, a prior layer of the experience which is operative in this moment.

I am clearly reacting to this element by building a visual configuration which complements the quality of the sound. In this sense, I am not just responding to the capacity of the vision mixer, bookreader and laptop in combination, but also simultaneously to the experience itself in its further construction. I am subject to, as well as the activator of, the sonic element of the piece in this instance; it loops back to me insistently, as it does to the experiencers, influencing the manner of my manipulation of the images available to me.

In this moment, I am both activator and acted upon by the experience I am constructing between the two types of image I manipulate and combine. My live interaction with these images renders them 'between images', occupying 'the space where photo, cinema and video meet and intertwine in a multiplicity of superpositions and configurations' [6, p.232]. The fact that I am both represented in this 'space between' through the live feed projection of my object manipulation and indeed that I am orchestrating the intertwining of the images themselves, enacts my own 'state between' performer and activator, between acting as the 'conductor' of the different elements in play and the 'composer' of the moment through my projected live actions.

In the second part of this practice example, I merge a live feed image of my own face with the pre-recorded images of the cars (see Figure 5). Here, my role is as a performer, at the heart of the onstage web of live feed camera, pre-recorded image and resultant composite projected image; a web which I have put in place, prior to taking my place within it. In this sense my state in performance is between creative technician and solo performer, but also between the onstage technology I employ and the experiencers, in that my actions in relation to and presence within the images created reveal the properties and potentialities of the bookreader, laptop and vision mixer in combination.

In my experience, live media modes of performance often focus on revealing the capacity of onstage technology to perform in this way; showing how it can be used to create effects which are unusual, unexpected or beyond its perceived use or capacity. In this sense the technology does not just pass through the 'medium' of the performer, it becomes live and performs through their actions.

The presence of the experiencers within this instance is not a direct influence as it is at other points within the piece. However, my role as an experiential performer in the process of construction of this movement allows me to position myself as an experiencer, allowing that to guide my responses to the material in play. In addition,

as in many live media performances, though the address to the experiencers might not be direct, and the performer's interaction focused on a laptop, screen or mixer, this work *is* performed for those who are present in the space.

Even when speaking into a camera, with my back to the experiencers (see Figure 6), there is still a heightened awareness of that speech being directed to them. This particular interaction with the onstage technology enacts communication which is both direct, in that the projected image of my face looks directly at the experiencers and indirect, in that my physical positioning on stage means I have no way of gauging their reactions to this moment in performance and cannot even see the resultant merged image which I am creating. My dislocated and isolated interaction with the experiencers in this instance forms a fascinating paradox with my activation of the experience as a whole and positioning at the hub of all the elements in play.

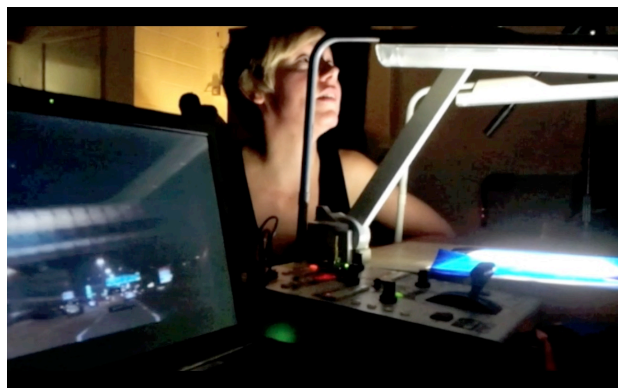


Figure 6: Speaking to the live feed camera (photo taken from *Cover*, Space for Change Project, London, 03/12/12)

The 'whirlwind of forces' described above, which is constantly acting upon me as performer/activator in the moment, influences all the activities which take place on stage and the intermedial combinations which are resultant from this activity. As such, through my actions, the performance continually feeds back into itself and loops and layers in a manner strikingly similar to the methods I employ to build sound onstage, using a loop pedal. This involves establishing a sonic base and then responding to that in order to build further threads of sound, which result in a composite soundscape. My onstage interaction with the loop pedal is a significant element of this performance mode and is one I will now go on to examine.

4.2. Activating the live soundscape: the onstage loop pedal in action

The live production of sound, using an onstage microphone and loop pedal is a recurrent feature of live intermedial performance. Throughout *Cover*, I responded directly to the contributions of the experiencers, who offered various song titles, through

building soundscapes from these songs. This involved singing a refrain, working with the lyrics of the song, or if I wasn't familiar with it, building in some way from its title or the artist mentioned. Receiving, processing and constructing from the song titles all happened in the moment of performance, with the looped sonic layers of sound generated instantly – a good example of the 'higher degree of aesthetic decision making' cited by Cooke as representative of live media performance.

The loop pedal technology I use onstage (see Figure 7) allows me to make an instant record of my voice and then to 'duet' with myself through harmonising with or counterpointing the sound already established. The one shot nature of working with this technology requires a high level of concentration, as any errors in rhythm, pitch or the tone of my voice are instantly recorded and play out beyond my control, persisting within the time and space of performance. The words and sounds I utter therefore seem to take on more weight and significance in the knowledge that they will be instantly recorded and repeated continuously. This technology also engenders a strangely dislocated and elongated form of liveness, in that a moment in time is captured and instantly replayed and repeated, existing beyond me, but constantly reflecting and feeding back to me, influencing my further production of sound.

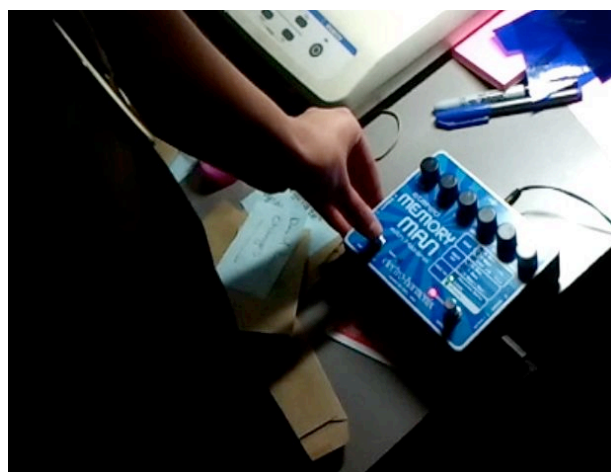


Figure 7: Manipulating the loop pedal in performance (photo taken from *Cover*, Space for Change Project, London, 03/12/12)

As an onstage live technological interface, the pedal is one which activates me as a performer; its capacity to perpetuate and naturally tend towards layered sound has heavily influenced both the nature of the experience I create and how I structure the different 'movements' of a performance. Usually a movement within a live intermedial performance will commence with me generating sound and allowing that sound to 'cover' the manipulation of image and object which follows. As explored earlier, the subsequent actions within each movement are often heavily influenced by the soundscape I have put in place, as the sound feeds back to me and I respond to its tone, structure and rhythm.

As I have intimated, interacting with the pedal requires focus on mechanics and timing to get it right and therefore demands my complete attention in the moment. However, there is also an aspect of what happens in that interaction where I become an instrument, both of the pedal's capacity and of how it affects me to generate and respond to sound in real time. This aspect of the live interaction involves listening and 'feeling' for the right harmony and rhythm to join my voice with its looped counterpart, becoming immersed in the growing layers of sound generated. I would not characterise this as total abandonment or a shamanic trance because of the high levels of concentration required, but it is the closest I get to being lost in the act of 'hyper-improvising', while simultaneously focusing intently on the timing of the interaction with the technology.

This close and intent interaction could arguably lead to an exclusion of the experiencers in that moment of interaction. However, the microphone acts as a counterpoint to the pedal, just as my careful construction counterpoints my immersion in the act of creation. Using the microphone affects both me as performer and those who experience that performance, in that it draws upon a lineage of live vocal performance, where direct communication between performer and experiencer is the focus. Unlike the live feed camera, which prompts me to turn my back on the experiencers, or the manipulation of objects on the bookreader, which encourages me to focus on the projected results of that manipulation, the microphone catalyses a more direct address to the experiencers.

In addition, in such moments in *Cover* when I use the microphone and pedal to respond to the experiencers' song suggestions, this is representative of direct interaction and influence on their part, played out through my interaction with the pedal and microphone. Yet again, I am occupying a particular state between the experiencers and the developing experience, between orchestrating the piece and being subject to its emergent properties and finally between 'performing' and 'activating' the material onstage.

5. CONCLUSION

This paper and its analysis of my practice represents a productive shift in terms of how I view and analyse my own role within the experience I create; not simply as a performer or activator, but also as one who experiences, responds, and the effect in live intermediality that this can have on the construction of the event.

As a live media performer, I recognise elements of Causey's 'medium' in what I do. However, as the hub of the various spokes of the experience, which pass through me, I am without doubt active within and constantly acting upon the elements of the experience which simultaneously influence its further construction. In this sense, the experience both emerges from and passes

through me, positioning me between the role of activator and activated; both the instrument of and catalyst for all that occurs.

The live interactions with the technology and the experiencers represent constantly shifting ground within a live intermedial performance. As demonstrated above, each onstage interaction with the technology and material I have available to me forms a further web of interactions between experiencers and developing experience, continually altering my positioning within that experience. As such the 'state between' I occupy in this work is also one which is 'live' - constantly shifting, changing and becoming other than what it was.

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